

# Temptation

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As we look at the people of Scripture, the individuals around us, and at our own lives, we see that temptation is part of everyone's life. Even those best known for their service to God, such as Abraham, Moses, David, Esther and Peter, struggled against temptation.

As we look back through history, we find that many methods were used to fight temptation. St. Benedict (480-547 AD) is said to have stripped off his habit and thrown himself into a thicket of briars and nettles to deliver himself from lustful thoughts of a woman.<sup>46</sup> It is said of St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) in the early days of his salvation, *"Upon seeing himself attacked by violent temptations of impurity, he would roll over naked over the snow."*<sup>47</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux responded to his daunting temptation by leaping into an icy cold pond, up to his neck in the water.<sup>48</sup>

There have been many methods used by sincere believers in their quest for greater holiness, but know that every believer struggles with temptation.

In the words of the Apostle Paul, *"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do . . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing"* (Rom 7:15, 18b, 19).

Even Christ was familiar with temptation. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that He was tempted in every respect as we are, yet was without sin.

Today, we come to the last verse of the Lord's Prayer, once again, dependent on the fact that we are children of the Father. We are like a weak and defenseless child whose hope and joy is found in staying near the Father. When faced with temptation that seems to be all-powerful, we must run into the arms of the Father, where we find full deliverance.

In Matthew 6:13 Jesus prays:

***"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."***

At first glance this verse is somewhat troubling. If we are needing to ask the Father not to lead us into temptation, then does that mean that sometimes He does lead us into temptation? The Bible answers this question with a resounding “No!” James 1:13 clearly tells us that *“God cannot be tempted by anyone, nor does He tempt anyone.”* If that is the case, then what does this verse mean?

God’s leading brings with it the understanding of us following. We see numerous times in Scripture that God allows His followers to be tested. *“Lead us not into temptation”* is the idea that God keeps us from falling to temptation in the midst of the trials and tests that we face.

*“But deliver us from evil.”* The word “deliver” has the meaning of freeing or rescuing from. We are already in the midst of evil. Whether we are talking of the evil desires in our hearts or the evil in the world around us, we clearly need deliverance from it.

When we drift from God. . . when we cling to sin. . . when we live for self. . . we distance ourselves from our adopted Father, who is ready and willing to meet all of our needs. It is in these moments that our perspectives are skewed, and we are susceptible to temptation.

These truths are at the center of our struggle with temptation. Temptation at its core is a battle of identity and a question of trust. In the moment that a Christian, a child of God, gives into sin and temptation, we are saying with our actions:

- *“Father, your wisdom is not good enough.”*
- *“Father, your provisions are not enough.”*
- *“Father, you don’t really know what is best for my life.”*
- *“Father, I don’t believe you.”*
- *“Father, I don’t have to submit to you, I can do what I want.”*

When we forget the gospel, we start to turn to the world to meet needs that have already been met by our Father. We begin to question the wisdom and the goodness of our God. Like a teenager questioning their parents’ rules, we begin to question the lordship that the Father has over our lives. We begin to question the relevance of God’s Word to our situations. We are already children of our heavenly Father and have everything that we will ever need, but yet we still listen to the voice of temptation, as if God’s provision is not sufficient and the world’s ways are greater than God’s ways. Where is our contentment? Where is our gratitude? Where is our submission that should be fueled by the grace of God that has already done more than we could ever ask or imagine?

One of the key passages for temptation in the Bible is James 1:13-15. It says:

*“<sup>13</sup> When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup>but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. <sup>15</sup>Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”*

In Scripture the words that have been translated as “temptation” were at other times also translated as “test” or “trial”. The meanings were that closely related. A temptation is a test that shows what is most important to us. It shows what is ruling our heart in that moment. Temptation is a situation when we are baited, enticed, or lured towards a sinful decision. An opportunity to either indulge in the forbidden, or turn and move towards the Father. Many times, in Scripture we see that a tempting situation served as a test to reveal a person’s heart and to refine his character.

In the book of Judges, the Israelites had entered the Promised Land, but all the ungodly inhabitants were not driven out. Judges 2:22 says, *“I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did.”*

The temptations of Scripture were not merely situations where people could be drawn into moral failure. There was a redemptive aspect to the temptation. Temptation was a crossroads where one could rebel against God and sin, or move towards God and obey. In success, their faith would be strengthened. In failure, their idols would be revealed and surrendered anew to Christ.

James 1:14 says, *“but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”*

Verse 14 explains where temptation comes from. All temptation that one faces begins from the evil desires that are within him. Temptation is a war of desires. Yes, Satan tempts us where we are most vulnerable, but each person will always be responsible for his own desires and choices. It is as if we are walking through the mall with many stores vying for our business. While none can touch us or force their will upon us, they all do their best to entice us. Those who are selling products that we do not care about are no challenge to ignore, but those offering products that promise to fulfill our longings are more difficult to refuse. This is even more difficult when Satan is the salesman. He is the tempter who knows our weaknesses. He knows our past failures. He also knows the lies that we believe (about ourselves and about God). In some ways, he knows us better than we know ourselves.

Vulnerability to temptation starts with one’s evil desires, but what desires are evil? Many would answer the question with responses such as desires for sexual immorality, revenge, lust, covetousness, violence, greed, or selfishness. By scriptural standards these would definitely fall into the category of evil desires, but this idea of evil desires goes even further.

In James 1:14, the word in the original language that is translated “evil desire” at other times is translated *coveting, craving, longing, desiring what is forbidden, and lust*.<sup>1</sup> Evil is characterized in Scripture as godless, idolatrous disobedience. In light of these biblical definitions, the meaning of “evil desires” grows to include a lot more than many people expect. For believers, God is to be our first love. We are to love Him with all of our hearts, all our souls, and all our minds (Matthew 22:37). To desire anything more than we desire God is a form of coveting, lust, or forbidden desire. Desiring anything more than Christ constitutes an evil desire.

These types of evil desires are often not seen as evil or sinful at all. Common desires such as success, comfort or respect many times seem innocent, but if they begin to rule our hearts in place of Christ, then

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<sup>1</sup> James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), G1939, Logos 2.1.

our lives will be led in a sinful, self-centered trajectory. We see this key role of the heart often in Scripture. Proverbs 4:23 says, ***"Guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life."*** Luke 6:43-45 quotes the teaching of Christ as, ***"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit . . . The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart."***

We all have evil desires of one kind or another that originate in our hearts. Even with sincere efforts we do not have the power to change our own hearts. Only God can bring conviction of sin, distaste for the things of the world, and a new nature in us. Heart change can only be done by God. It is in the Father that one finds his Defender against temptation.

A phrase you might have heard some use in the past is, *"The devil made me do it!"* That will never be true. All temptations that we face will have begun from the evil desires within us. We will always be responsible for our own choices, but there are times Satan is definitely involved.

Satan tempts us where we are most vulnerable. 1 Peter 5:8 describes Satan with these words, ***"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."*** In John 10:10, Jesus tells how Satan has come ***"to kill steal and destroy"***. Satan also uses other people to entice us (Prov. 1:10) and twists Scripture to hide the truths of God. (Gen. 3) Satan knows our past failures. In some ways he knows us better than we know ourselves. But even in his treachery all he can do is tempt in the areas of our desires, hoping that we will give in to them.

We see this described at the end of James 1:14 in the idea of being drawn out or lured into sin. It would be similar to that of an animal that is lured into a trap that has been set with meat that it desires. Another example would be an unsuspecting fish that is drawn to a hook that is hidden by a type of bait that the fish seeks.<sup>2</sup> We see this similar idea when reading about the young man drawn out by a prostitute in Proverbs 7:6-23. Without the initial desire, the young man would not be drawn to his destruction. The desire determines the type of temptation.

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In the words of Madame Guyon's (1648-1717), ***"The surest and safest method for conquest is simply to turn away from the evil and draw yet nearer and closer to our God."***<sup>3</sup> She likened it to a child who clings to her mother in total confidence of safety, after seeing a monster. ***"The Lord will defend us from temptation; therefore, our greatest responsibility is to run to him. Our energies are not to be spent fighting the temptation. Within ourselves we do not have the resources to win. Our energies are to be spent running to the Father. He will win the battle for us."***

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<sup>2</sup> James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), G1828, Logos 2.1.

<sup>3</sup> Madame Guyon, "Short and Easy Method of Prayer," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed April 25, 2013, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/guyon/prayer.xxi.html?highlight=temptation#highlight>.

As the Israelites were told in Ezekiel 36:26-27, ***"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."***

Oh, the sweetness of this truth. That in the midst of our struggle with temptation, that God will grant us a new heart and a new spirit to bring about holiness and obedience in our lives.

As our heart is turned towards Jesus Christ, we find safety and refuge. As this becomes our custom and our way of life, every encounter with temptation will propel us closer and closer to our Savior. Jesus is the only thing that can dethrone one's idolatrous evil desires. John Piper expresses this biblical principle in these words, ***"I know of no other way to triumph over sin long-term, than to gain a distaste for it, because of a superior satisfaction in God."***<sup>4</sup>

If drawing near to our heavenly Father is the key to victory over temptation, then how do I draw near to God?

One must remember that these actions of drawing near to God are not strategies to changing our own hearts. Only Christ can change the hearts of man. These actions of drawing near to God only serve to draw us near to God so that He then can change the evil desires of our hearts and bring victory over our temptations. As we delight in the Father, He will shape the desires of our hearts (Psalm 37:4).

***"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)***

May we follow the example of Christ as He faced temptation from Satan in the desert. With every temptation Jesus turned to Scripture for His defense.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul says, ***"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."*** This promise is in effect as long as we are staying near to the Father. If we are choosing to consistently live far from the Father, His resources of deliverance may not always be accessible.

The following verses help us understand how we are to draw near to God and fortify ourselves against temptation:

- Psalm 37:4 – ***"Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart."***
- Psalm 73:25-26 – ***"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."***

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God*, (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 11.

- Hebrews 12:1-2 – *“Lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.”*
- Matthew 26:41 – *“Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*
- Proverbs 4:14-15 – *“Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not proceed in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not pass by; turn away from it and pass on.”*
- Galatians 5:16 – *“Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”*
- James 5:16 – *“Confess your sins one to another and pray for one another.”*
- Psalm 119:11 – *“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”*
- Romans 13:14 – *“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”*
- 1 Corinthians 6:19 – *“Flee from sexual immorality.”*
- James 4:7 – *“Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”*

#### Discussion questions:

1. What did you find most interesting or thought-provoking from this sermon?
2. In your opinion, what temptations seem to be the most difficult for people to break free from?
3. How would you explain this phrase in your own words? “Temptation reveals what we are loyal to.”
4. In the moment that a Christian gives into sin and temptation, what types of things are we saying about God with our actions? (refer to page 2 if needed). Do you agree?
5. James 1:14 says, *“Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”* Who are we tempted by? How are our desires connected to the types of temptations that we face?
6. What do you think God wants you to remember from this sermon?
7. What do you think God wants you to do about it?
8. Is there any way that we can help you with this?
9. How can we pray for you?